

# Investigating God Instead of Proving God

## Methodological Preliminaries of Transcendental Research

*(Translation of: Gott erforschen statt Gott beweisen)*

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### **Abstract**

*On the basis of a fundamental problem of all proofs of God's existence - which we call the problem of "wrong synonymy" - the differentiation between transcendence and the concept of God is introduced as necessary for gaining a sensible construct and thus being able to be connected as a social-scientific construct with empirical facts (operationalisations) subsequently. It will be discussed what makes it possible to achieve an operationalisation of the transcendence construct and what are the methodological base lines to which a research program resulting from it should feel obliged.*

**Keywords:** Proof of God's existence, transcendence, transcendental psychology, religious experience, theory of science, methodology

### **Arguments for God**

No proof of God's existence has ever convinced the sceptic. In the case of the, according to Leibniz, so-called argument from contingency (or with Kant: cosmological proof of God) it is argued that God must exist because the fact of the existence of the not necessarily existing assumes that the first cause lying before all contingency has determined the remaining facts to their current manner of being. Kant (1763) criticises this proof of God's existence by separating primarily two implied conclusions: First the conclusion drawn from the fact that all being is non-necessary (contingent) on the assumption that the first cause must be a necessary being; and secondly the conclusion from this to the specific existence of God with his/her typical attributes. This latter conclusion, i.e. the

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to dedicate this article - hoping not to compromise them by its simplicity - to my teachers from the Jesuit Order, in particular Werner Holter SJ, Hans-Joachim Martin SJ and Wolfgang Statt who have taught me to put every reflection about God on rational and life-worldly bases.

equation of a necessary first being with God's attributes, is considered by Kant (1763) as especially questionable.

This can be understood if we imagine we wanted to convince a sceptic of the fact that the argument of contingency is true. The first part of the proof can be seen in the following simplified logical structure:

*Syllogism I:*

P1 (I): Nomological thesis: „If something exhibits a certain form of existence, although it could also exhibit quite a different one, there is an ultimate cause for this“.

P2 (I): Observational proposition: „This universe exhibits a certain existence (but could exhibit a different one)“.

C (I): Conclusion: „The existence of this universe exhibits an ultimate cause“.

The sceptic would possibly agree to this conclusion, although the details of the respective assertion have still not been discussed. Nevertheless, the second line of reasoning is not understandable any more to any atheist or agnostic:

*Syllogism II:*

P1 (II): Nomological thesis: „If an ultimate cause exists which creates a certain existence out of many possibilities, then this is God [= There is an X which is this cause and that is God]“.

P2 (II): Premise from syllogism I: „The ultimate cause exists“.

C (II): Conclusion: „This is God (implies: God exists)“.

However, this syllogism seems to the atheistic sceptic extremely suspicious, because the premise P1 (II) states a material implication, in which the second proposition („this is God“ or: „God exists“) is not a necessary result of the first sentence because it is not a priori included in it. However, this is generally the case with sentences referring to the empirical world, which is why the premise either must be proved before, or be confirmed as a common basis of the parties.

This is illustrated by the example of the famous syllogism according to which Socrates is mortal, because all human beings are mortal and Socrates is a human being. The nomothetical statement „All human beings are mortal“ can only account for a valid premise because the parties agree about the fact that immortal beings are not to be named as human. Karl Popper (1966) has shown that all such empirical based universal propositions are stipulations and not aprioric truths at the example of an assertion, once having appeared as a definitive truth to every European: „All (adult) swans are white“ (after a black Australian variety was discovered, the sentence has become empirically wrong, hence it is not an empirical truth). Consequently we always must agree with our partner on our premises, before we may call the conclusion valid. Because of this, all proofs of God's existence fail in their function as a proof.

However, the possible existence of a final cause among unchangeable entities is shown by the distinction of its meanings. For the final cause is (a) some being for whose good an action is done, and (b) something at which the action aims; and of these the

latter exists among unchangeable entities though the former does not. The final cause, then, produces motion as being loved, but all other things move by being moved. Now if something is moved it is capable of being otherwise than as it is. Hence, we may call it the primary form of spatial motion (bearing in mind the assumption of its actuality), as long as it is subject to change, in this respect it is capable of being otherwise, in place, even if not in substance. But since there is actually something which moves while itself remains unmoved, this can in no way be otherwise than as it is. For motion in space is the first kind of change, and motion in a circle the first kind of spatial motion; and this is the product of the first mover. The first mover, then, exists of necessity; and in so far as it exists by necessity, its mode of being is good, and it is in this sense a first principle.

Besides, the actually critical point is the equation of a possibly provable principle with God. This is clearly illustrated in the historical *adoption* of the Aristotelian argument for God's existence by the unmoved mover which proceeds as follows: 1) „Now if something is moved it is capable of being otherwise than as it is“ (according to the thesis of contingency above); 2) „But since there is something which moves while itself unmoved, existing actually, this can in no way be otherwise than as it is“ (postulate of a necessary first cause of every movement); 3) „The first mover, then, exists of necessity; and in so far as it exists by necessity, its mode of being is good, and it is in this sense a first principle“ (postulate of necessity of a being with a further attribute; Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1072b 4ff.). Here the criticism applies, according to our differentiation above, first of all to syllogism I, i.e. the assertion that the existence of movement presupposes an unmoved moving. Though one can also call into question the need of a principle resulting from it according to sentence (3), however, an equation of this principle with a certain image of God is not implied here. Since if Aristotle sometimes speaks of a „first and unmoved *being*“ (e.g., Aristotle *Met.* 1073a 30), he uses *ousia*, the substantivized participle of “to be” (*einai*) with which the cognition of an impersonal „first existence“ lies closer than of a personal God.

However, the adoption of the Aristotelian argument by the scholastics already had been (like all incorporation of Aristotle into Christian thought) a “postadjustment”: The Aristotelian first mover in fact was nothing else than the starting point, the principle (*principium*) of all possibility that from the one real ground other reality can be actualised and thus sets in motion the endless chain of being as an actual fact in the Now and at the same time as a potential in the future. To read the Christian concept of God into this principle is compatible with Christian theology and was facilitated by Aristotle himself whose philosophy exceeded the Greek polytheism completely and thus allowed (like already Plato) comparisons to the Christian view. But the specific Christian concept of God, however, was hardly implied by him (anyway not as such, but also hardly in its analogous concept of the highest good etc.). Thus with Thomas Aquinas' reception of Aristotle arises already a moment of taking over a concept by another context which changes the content in a subtle manner.

Nowadays the argument of contingency has found a new formulation by scientifically based considerations suggesting that there are endless possibilities for the design of a

universe. Therefore, the fact that a universe exists at all – moreover, functioning according to harmonious laws (or – in other variants – existing in this special form) requires a determination, i.e., a decision by a – if personalised – God as „determinator“. This argumentation has been expressed by Whitehead (1984; 1985), but of course not named as a proof of God’s existence. Contemporary scientists like Hans-Peter Dürr (Dürr 2000) dissociate themselves even further from the argumentative load of such proofs: In this case the fundamental indeterminateness is derived from quantum physics, while the so called „assertative hand“ which creates facticity out of potentiality is not even described as the hand *of God* any more (although the metaphoric use of the “hand” points to a person and still associates to the Christian symbol of the „hand of God“).

Obviously it makes sense if modern physicists eschew from speaking about “God” while considering the question of the mystery behind the computable world which digs itself deeper and deeper into the structure of physical theory, because the equation of this mystery or *principium* and the concept of God, being linked with numerous denotations, is at best a logically possible convention, but not a necessary logical implication. Very often, however, the argumentation is not even pronounced logically correct, but purely rhetorical, and thus produces a typical logical fallacy which we can call *wrong synonymy*. To name the mystery – obviously not excludable from physics – “God”, conforms to the fallacy of wrong synonymy, because the mysterious in and behind physics and the God of Christian theology would have to be put into relation, but they are not synonymous a priori at all.

By giving attention to the fallacy of wrong synonymy, however, the opportunity arises to take seriously an argumentative rope of assumptions like those of Whitehead and Dürr. For that aim it is necessary to free the concept of God from the occupation of discourses which have a different aim and meaning, and to introduce a new concept instead. This concept would have to be able to illustrate the mysterious realm „behind physics“ (metaphysics) accurately. It also would have to be able to enclose the specific answer to this question given by the religions without preferring one religion to the others (because this would necessarily mean an encroachment of a foreign concept by a predefined conceptual frame, the same which committed scholasticism towards Aristotle). And the same time as a metaphysical concept it would have to withstand all criticism to which metaphysical concepts feel exposed in the post-enlightened history of philosophy (cf. Harnack 2011b). As an expression for such a concept I suggest *transcendence*.

## **Transcendence as a concept and construct**

What may be understood by transcendence and which formal characteristic shall the concept of transcendence contain? Let us start in the same way as our natural understanding proceeds, i.e. with a nominal definition. Thus, transcendence, in the most general way, is that area or that movement which exceeds something – or more exactly: something *usual*. If we leave the definition in that way, it remains very unspecific and encloses, therefore, cases which we do not want to integrate explicitly if we want to refer

specifically to the religious or spiritual realm. In this case – like in a traditionally sociological perspective, as the one of Hubert Knoblauch (2009) in correspondence to Luckmann’s perspective on religion – transcendence is even seen in the social transcending of the personal ego into the other person and the social structure. But this eludes the necessary struggling about a specific religious area of “transcendence”.

Karl Rahner (1976), in his transcendental theology, gives a meaning not only to the concept of transcendence, but also to the adjective “transcendental” in a sense which refers critically to Kant’s use of these expressions. Rahner opposes to the limitation of the human cognitive faculties in Kant’s transcendental philosophy, which assumes a real transcendence finally to be impossible, by the human being’s fundamental disposition to transcendence. Rahner’s central term „transcendental experience“ describes the anthropological premise, standing before all individual experience, that the person as an undetermined, reason-gifted subject is open to an infinite mental and experiential horizon, that s/he is a question for him/herself which s/he can not answer by her/himself, but only from a higher perspective. As a person s/he experiences him/herself in qualities like freedom of will or the ability to love, which are put into the world in a manner not created by him/herself. This referentiality to his/her own transcendence as the only possibility to understand ones own existence is according to Rahner the anthropological premise on account of which the concrete experience of God occurs. Rahners transcendental theology, nevertheless, seems to be arguable in my opinion with regard to the possibility to understand transcendence again as a purely immanent, nonreligious determination of the human being, thus being similar to Plessner’s definition of the principle of eccentricity.

But the remarkable aspect of Rahner’s work (which can also be found in the work of other authors, e.g., Lehmann 1965) is the fact that they do not understand transcendence as a regional entity beyond the here and now, but rather as a concept of relation or activity. If we understand transcendence as the inherent strength of a person to exceed herself by focussing to something different, then it becomes easier to get a grip on the contradiction between genuine religious transcendence and worldly immanence, about which Werner Schüssler (2002, 768) writes that with the concept of transcendence, „always a certain discontinuity and a certain hiatus is linked“ from which „the problem of the mediation“, sc. between transcendence and immanence, originates.

If we do not get confused by the iridescent nuances of this concept, we will recognise transcendence as the human gift which connects him/her with what is not from this world. We could use the concept as an actional concept (we transcend something) as well as a relational concept, but also as if we could watch an “object” called the „transcendent“, what we are not able to do, nevertheless, because transcendence is given to us only as a structural concept, an interactional fact between construction and perception, as something relational. Therefore, we would win just a supposed precision by replacing “transcendent“ with a name for the object to which our transcending reaches out for, principally with, e.g., Rudolf Otto’s *numinous*, which has also to be considered as a relational term (sc., the selfrevelation of the divine in the immanence, in the individual). If

we speak of *transcendence*, of a *transcendental relation*, of *transcending*, these terms have no different meanings substantially (but only contextually). Therefore, there is no point arguing about whether in the experience of transcendence an entity called transcendence (or God) will be experienced *really*.

Such a statement would be nothing but a reification of a relational concept, a concretization where in reality nothing else exists as the relation between a person and the idea thought by him/her by which s/he refers to a possible empirical fact or a mental process. The aspect of reification can even pertain material content, when applied to the concept of a personal God (e.g., in the understanding of a negative theology which takes the commandment to make no image of God seriously in its depth), but at least, however, we should use it methodologically. This does not mean, however, that such a methodological exclusion of a transcendent as an entity could not make such a personal entity more plausible at the end of our research project than it seems for us at the present moment. By this, however, we dismiss the need to debate the correctness of the *object* in an „experience of God” because we can talk about transcendental experience only in a sense in which the object is and remains a part of the experiential horizon of the subject.

If we now use the concept “transcendence” in a syllogism like the one indicated above, we have gained at least one thing: We use an equivalent concept to speak about a hidden mystery behind the physical universe, a transcendence which can not be explained physically alone, but can be indicated as an explicative gap in the physical theory itself. However, our concept suffers from lacking any additional benefit, since the replacement of a concept like “mystery” by a concept “transcendence” referring to the person as its background of experience owns just a small increase in explicative content (some will even argue that its content is a purely tautological replacement of one statement by an identical one). Since we have defined *transcendence* as a pure abstraction (or noumenon), the concept exists in so far as we use it as a social convention only. However, if we want the concept to become more than a free-floating mental bubble, it has to be established on the empirical facts of this world. We are thus forced to create a new term by using the formal characteristic of a pure abstraction. The new term, however, should stand for something else being observable, so experienceable. If, however, transcendence stands for something which is not experienceable, our project has failed.

We have already seen that transcendence expresses itself as a transcendental experience in the relation between a person and what is exceeding him/her. Therefore, transcendence seems to be a concept translatable into human experiences, consequently a social-scientific construct. Constructs, as for example intelligence, are not observable directly, but reasonable as a heuristic programme and nucleus of a theory system, because they show consequences *sui generis* beyond the head of their “constructor”. Although, for example, intelligence was first specified as a construct by Alfred Binet, it already made a difference whether someone was more or less intelligent. However, Binet continued and explicated these implied observations by developing the construct’s operationalisation, i.e. such rules which made the construct translatable into observational data.

Thus for understanding social-scientific constructs we always need an operationalisation instruction which encloses those observable incidents which seem relevant indica-

tions for the construct. Vice versa the construct will be changed and corrected by a number of different observations over the years. Without this returning process the construct with its operationalisations would always remain a purely arbitrary idea which would precisely correspond to any nontheoretical reality because this very reality was defined according to it. But if the construct itself is determined retrospectively by the observations, social research proceeds in a hermeneutic process contributing to higher steps of concept understanding. Therefore, the construct is that theoretical condition which has a double function, as it makes it possible to deduce empirical phenomena out of its theoretical structure, and since it will be defined itself inductively by the way of occurrence of these phenomena, receiving an internal conceptual structure and being equipped with attributes. Thus the psychology did not remain at Binet's version of an intelligence test. But researchers rather developed new operationalisations by taking into consideration the appearing practical requirements as well as new theories, which changed the construct of "intelligence".

This circular character of the construct in the service of hermeneutics, but to the displeasure of the critical-rationalistic model, can be described, more exactly, in three ideal circles: In the first circle from a preunderstanding of the construct a corresponding area of operationalisations will be assigned. In the second circle it is ascertained what the assigned objects state about the construct and the construct will be corrected accordingly. In the third circle theoretical expectations (explanations, predictions and technologies, i.e. pragmatic statements) on the observational objects are formulated on account of a theory linked with the construct and then will be checked. We can call the first circle the theoretical prephase of the research, which we discuss, for example, in the present essay. We can call the second phase the phase of the investigation of the construct; the third phase the phase of application of the construct which forms at the same time the phase of testing the construct. Then the process begins once again, perhaps, with the first, perhaps, the second circle, but now at a higher level of knowledge.

Unfortunately, the defining attributes and empirical phenomena to which our construct must refer, in order to keep its reason, in the case of the construct of the transcendent are not easily to declare. This is the whole difficulty with transcendence ("God") that it is exactly the contentious issue - different from constructs like "intelligence" or "gravitation" - whether its operationalisations will be accepted as sensible and coherent correspondences to the construct. If we decide to appeal to authorities, we get in the murky waters of dogmatism, but in the other case we will land on the slowly swallowed island of a stopgap-God who is able to explain only what has not been explained by other sciences before. But the problems are only gradually and not principally different from those with the construct of intelligence which we have to *construct* and define operationalised according to the same specifications, in order to investigate it afterwards, and thus avoiding to concede that it was *just a construction*.

But have we *proved* vice versa with the explanation of intelligence the existence of intelligence? Absolutely not, because we have merely acted on the opportune assumption that intelligence is a meaningful construct because it summarises qualities in the best

possible way, which were always observable as part of human reality. With it we must dismiss quite finally the possibility *to prove* the existence of something like intelligence or transcendence. All we can do is to approve the usefulness of such a construct or to deny it. But we should also consider the reverse and ask ourselves if a statement like „intelligence does not exist” makes sense. This statement may make a lot of sense in a constructivist discourse in which somebody would like to point out to the fact that we should not take intelligence for a natural fact, but just for a construct. But the statement makes no sense in a context about the social reality of people who are equipped with a lot or very little intelligence.<sup>2</sup>

The same should apply for the concept of transcendence: If we can find fitting, by the construct of transcendence well illustrated circumstances within our socially shared reality, then it does not make sense *not* to speak of transcendence. Besides, we should establish a clear distinction between the construct “transcendence”, its operationalisation in the “experience of transcendence” and its theoretical embedding in such statements which explicate the construct. We should also keep in mind that the theorems of the transcendence construct can never be verified logically according to Karl Popper’s logic of research. On the other hand, we should not attach to much significance to Popper’s assertion that theories were following purely logical laws of falsification, because in reality theories are good as long as they can explain the reality in a more useful way than other theories (Lakatos). We search - very briefly - for a theoretical construct *transcendence* which serves as the centre of a theory, thus helping us to explain observation data better than other theories. Therefore we primarily need the classificatory relation between the construct and the observational sentences, i.e., the operationalisation of the construct.

## **Operationalisation**

If we today hope to find an operationalisation valid for a specifically religious or spiritual transcendence, we should appeal neither to the idea of an intelligible transcendence alone according to which transcendent is called that what exceeds our horizon of rational understanding, nor to a concept of sensory transcendence, according to which an idea not given in our senses is transcendent. We should rather refer to a demarcation of the phenomena - in the face of a scientific knowledge grown to the limits of understanding - which nowadays appears to us as being worldly-immanent. Transcendent then is what exceeds our conception of a materialist reality. With this we mean the following: While the term “material reality” refers to a certain part of the empirical reality, the expression materialist reality means the way of empirical world in which somebody lives for whom also mental facts, like aesthetics, love and philosophy, are basically reducible to material conditions. This is a significant difference, because there seems to be a generally shared idea of a material reality in our society or between different societies. But even if the

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<sup>2</sup> About this difference goes the book of Ian Hacking (1999): *The social construction of what?* Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press.

concrete extension of this idea is not certain, we can assume that by the sensuous constitution of the human body all people agree primarily which objects they feel as belonging to a material reality, so that we may accept the shared perception of a material reality as an anthropological constant. This material world is transcended in our subjective feeling by the mental of course, but thus we have not yet come to a specifically religious or spiritual concept of transcendence. Nevertheless, we can observe that it makes an essential difference whether somebody recognises a mental reality as an own realm of being or not.

Therefore, as materialism we can understand any ideology - be it naive, be it scientific or philosophical - which is founded on the conditions of the classical concept of matter based on the natural sensual perception, and which absolutizes this idea of matter in an ontological sense. In its naive, but consistent variation it appears in the multiple attachments to consumption and superficiality which nowadays characterizes a large part of the so called "civilised" societies. It is generally doubtful whether there can be a philosophical materialism beyond this naive materialism, because it probably makes no sense (considering the parallelism, but lacking reciprocal solvability of the linguistic games of materialist and idealistic scientists in the mind-matter debate) to speak of a separation of matter (brain) and mind, instead of just different perspectives to the same object. However, if that is the case then philosophical materialism has got no own content compared with a philosophical idealism because finally both refer to the same just with a different purely metaphysical theorem. In a time in which the concept of matter turns out to be increasingly useless for the objective sciences as well as for philosophy, the term materialism can be used reasonably only for describing the naive lifeworldly materialism which again yields peculiar results in the heads of the scientists.

But then, the discussions, devoting themselves to the subject of religious experience, are about the question why a materialist model should not be more appropriate to explain such experiences than a transcendental one. This question can be answered as follows: We must distinguish between a primary and a secondary realm of explanation of every experience. The primary realm of explanation is not defined by the spontaneous classification of the experiencing subject alone, as some authors may think, but rather by the experience of the subject on the one hand and by other involved subjects on the other hand. If this consideration is done in a careful manner, it will not be possible to explain the experience as appropriately and completely by an alternative model (even by testing all possible alternative models), but only by a model stemming from that realm which by this procedure appears to be the genuine one. This can be shown very well at the example of artistic creations. While psychology, sociology and national economy may provide models for a partially appropriate explanation of artistic creativity, within the subject and within all listening to his/her introspective story carefully, remains the impression of an explanative gap which cannot be filled by these sciences. Perhaps, a combination of all of them might create a correct picture. But if the artist and his hermeneutic interpreter stand in a dialogue with each other, as it is well known to qualitative social researchers, they will create a general view, wherein the genuine aspect of his/her creativ-

ity appears authentically. This genuine aspect does not devalue the other attempts, but for an artist it may be significant that the applied model be one of art theory, not of the social sciences. The reason for the fact that the explicatory value of this model is larger than that of other models is because it delivers more information about the object of art than, for example, a psychological approach. Hence, the elected access has proved itself useful.

We can even suppose as a tentative principle that the approach of that field from which stems the experiential object according to the classification of the relevant persons (i.e., of the subject and of the hermeneutic interpreter comprehending him/her holistically) owns the largest explicatory value. As already said, other fields should also be allowed to come into operation, but they should respect that their explanations cannot nullify the explanation given by the primary realm of explication in the way of a totalitarian reductionism (cf. Harnack 2011b). This has to be observed in particular in case of the construct of transcendence. Apart from the fact that exactly the same assumptions apply there as they were just met with regard to art production: It is the reflected process of classification by a subject and his/her comprehending interpreter who determine the primary realm of explication (e.g., transcendence).

How could such a process of reflection be translated into the potential result of calling an experience transcendental? Here we must present as an ideal the case that the subject and his interpreter are able to overlook all the other scientific explanation models at least in general. This is not really an unrealistic demand, because an expert for the area of transcendental experience should be able to consider as an interpreter at least the most important psychological and other possible explanations of the experience. Where the points are put for the decision that it concerns an experience to be classified to the realm of transcendence is where any other explanation leaves the named explicatory gap clearly for the hermeneutic and phenomenological interpreter.

This is exactly the typical gap which seems on the one hand so weird to the materialist that he must deny the phenomenon for not to having to argue with the incompleteness of his own world view, or, on the other hand, almost necessarily widens the look on a reality beyond the worldly existence to the observer equipped with a farther horizon. Therefore, only such phenomena are to be accepted in the class of relevant, i.e. "spiritual" ("religious") experiences which in their primary realm of explanation do not belong to a materialistic world view. Notice, that we can fulfil this classification only tentatively. However, this is no big damage, because it does not differ in any way from the proceeding of other areas of social sciences, comparably to the scientist who does not know what intelligence really is, but makes it the starting point of his first hermeneutic circle, what is understood as such by some competent people, in order "to feed" the suitable construct with it. The crucial point, however, is that our nominal definition of transcendence given above checks at the same time whether a phenomenon can be a natural operationalisation of it or not. For example, a phenomenon like the itch of the big toe would hardly turn out as a relevant indicator for the intelligence construct, the speed at which somebody reaches for a falling down glass, in some cases may (in other perhaps not). Likewise, we will have to find out by inclusion and cross check whether a vision of angels with

person A is a spiritual phenomenon or not. We will also have to find criteria which distinguish spiritual from other, for example pathological phenomena. In any case, we will take into consideration the *possibility* that this phenomenon could belong to the field of transcendental experiences since our whole research is based on the acceptance of the existence of the transcendent.

This classification is certainly not a strictly logical one. An operationalisation of a construct being epistemologically completely satisfactory would be a necessary relation in the sense of an entire mapping between phenomenon and explicatory theorem, so between religious experience and the hypothesis: „This is an experience of transcendence“. Such a necessary relation, nevertheless, cannot exist for principal reasons, not because it was not possible for practical reasons to distinguish if a phenomenon belongs to the primary realm of explanation “materialistic model of explanation” versus “transcendental model”, but because it is absolutely impossible to draw a necessary connection between a phenomenon and a certain model of explanation (i.e. the problem of induction, known since Hume).

Therefore there is nothing else for us but to give an account about how the relation is between operationalisation and construct, and how we can get from one to the other and check the connection between both. A possible “algorithm” for it, the logic of abduction according to Charles S. Peirce, can be roughly described as the heuristic process which from a supposition establishes a feasible classificatory relation between observation data and explanatory hypothesis. As long as we have not embedded the construct in a theory for generating hypotheses, we can describe the process of constructing legitimate operationalisations with the abduction method.

Peirce had become aware that neither deduction nor induction produced new knowledge. They could merely check existing propositions for their correctness. But how was it possible to get to a logically correct new hypothesis? Peirce thought that there must have been a genuine logically valid algorithm, by means of which a hypothesis is generated from a single fact intuitively and afterwards checked by deduction and induction. According to G. Deledalle “the differentiation between abduction, induction and deduction is quite clear” (in 2000, 40, translated by me). “The abduction suggests a hypothesis, the deduction draws different conclusions from it which the induction tests”. In its first step this is a mysterious process of concluding from a single fact on a law behind it, but only if one accepts, that the human mind must form a hypothesis on account of a single phenomenon, while in reality a whole background of experience is available to it. A normally intelligent child will find it, e.g., much more difficult to generate the concept of a disease from a physical symptom than a physician. This is due to the fact that for both the abduction process is available, but not the contents for its application.

The fact that therefore the abduction (in contrast to the assumption of Peirce) is presumably only a heuristic, not a logical process, does not change its value for producing temporary stores of knowledge. Concretely we ask whether the angel who visited Berta at night secretly in her bedroom can be attributed to a transcendental or a psychological condition. Thereby we certainly own enough indications for the one or the other hy-

pothesis. Indeed, if we are able to step back from prejudices, and finally out of a more intuitive information processing we will tend to one of them. We verify this tendency subsequently by the observed facts, testing the necessarily resulting consequences in a second turn of data aggregation. Just now Berta's experience is a legitimate component of our of data compilation for operationalising the construct of transcendence. Because transcendence constitutes a difficult field, the kind of relation between the construct and its empirical manifestations should interest us also in respect to the contents. Following the spiritually interested semiotician Peirce, we could speak in this context about a transcendental semiotic theory, thus being no methodological but a substantial theory it is not subject of this text (but a later one).

### **Programme and limits of transcendental research**

We now have developed a preconcept of transcendence and have also added an algorithm to this for classifying a certain set of natural or provoked operationalisations. Thus we can use transcendence as a concept within theoretical propositions being empirically referential, i.e., as a social-scientific construct. Now, however, there is a serious risk of losing the religious or spiritual element in our preunderstanding of transcendence again, if we misunderstand transcendence as a research object within the materialist paradigm and arrange it under its presumptions. In order to prevent this, we need an axiom of our research beyond a construct, i.e., a precondition, which will implicitly (like the materialist usually does) or better: explicitly become the pivot of our reflection. This axiom must be as follows: *Transcendence exists and it has got real effects on the life of people* (and other beings). This supposition would be self-evident if we were talking about a concept within the materialist world view like "intelligence". Of course no research project about the intelligence of somebody makes sense if the researcher considers intelligence to be ineffective and irrelevant or even inexistent. Today, however, the psychologist of religion acts in such a way as if the intelligence researcher would say: „Let us see how adults behave who believe in the existence of their own intelligence“! Although this would be absolutely absurd, today the scientific handling of transcendence is marked by exactly this approach. So it is indispensable to put the investigation of transcendence under an explicit axiom which may assert nothing less than that our construct really has got effective consequences on our life, in the shape and shaping of our world and every thing else. We want to call this elsewhere (Harnack 2011a) more exactly described axiom the *axiom of transcendence*.

Transcendence as a construct needs transcendence as an axiom because otherwise we would run into a materialist elimination of the construct. This risk is so big, because most researchers are socialised in a materialist climate and consider it to be natural that transcendence may not appear as an academic axiom. The transcendence axiom as a real axiom has not to be proved, just as the construct cannot be proved. For a better understanding of the latter, we will take a look at the following simple syllogism:

P1: Transcendence is given, when X.

P2: X is given

C: So transcendence.

Though this sounds logically coherent, it is nevertheless illegitimate within the research process, because we get into an inevitable circular argument which can be recognised immediately with the example of the construct of intelligence: If we see that somebody can count then have we proven that intelligence exists? No way. We have merely found out that intelligence could be a useful theorizing for what lies behind a person's empirically given efficiency as a dispositional potentiality. However, the existence of intelligence is not provable because it's always us who define what should be an operationalisation of intelligence.

Reasonable would be a research which concretises the intelligence construct by means of a syllogism such as

P1: If Paul can calculate and calculation skills mean superiority in many academic areas, then it has to be considered sensibly to consider calculation skills as a part of intelligence.

P2: Paul can count AND this means superiority in many academic areas

K: It makes sense to consider calculation skills as a part of intelligence.

In the same way for the transcendence construct the following is valid:

P1: If Berta can see angels and seeing angels is connected to other areas belonging to the construct of transcendence, then it makes sense to consider seeing angels as a part of the transcendence construct. Etc.

This we could call a research in the second hermeneutic circle, i.e., we assume that we have already found a formulation of transcendence and an operationalisation (first circle) which enables to us to name the other mentioned areas of transcendence and to demand that different areas of a single construct should promote each other mutually or at least not contradict to the whole. In the second circle we try to attain certainty on account of our presumptions how this construct looks like and what exactly is a part of it. Seeing angels could lead to the fact that this person meditates worse with an abstract object, but that s/he leads in total a more spiritual life. Then there would be a hypothetical structure within the transcendence construct which illustrates exactly this connection and which forms together with other hypotheses a whole structure. This very structure might be called the theoretical structure of the construct.

But in reality we are not only concerned with spiritual experiences (operationalisations) and the one construct of transcendence, but with many different explications of the transcendence construct, regarding both very theoretical and very practical levels. A very theoretical explication would be the dogma of Trinity in Christianity, a very practical one the prayer of the heart in the Eastern Church. If now we begin to consider such explica-

tions of our transcendence theorem, we proceed to the third hermeneutic circle which isolates single theorems from the whole construct, puts up hypotheses, tests them and feeds the whole construct with this process. For example, we can derive comparative research programs which are either comparative with regard to the explications or comparative with regard to individuals. If we compare the meditation technique of the Tibetan Dzogchen tradition with the Japanese Soto Zen School, we can apply different criteria of the “outcome” (depth of experience, practical effects in the life-world, effects on spiritually relevant personality variables), like meditation research already does. But we can also draw new conclusions from the transcendence axiom about the consistency of transcendence; like we can say: Intelligence can be promoted better thus and thus and this tells us a little bit about what intelligence really is. Or we take a look at the individual and say: This person needs this support for her intelligence development and that person a different one. The same would be necessary in the spiritual realm: The person on the spiritual path, for which the transcendence axiom has got practical relevance, has to confront himself permanently with new questions, new positions of points which determine his spiritual action, his spiritual plans, values and inclinations. He will receive a certain answer to the questions from a spiritual teacher X, but will receive a different answer from a teacher Y, particularly if they belong to different traditions. Instead of asking what the seeker himself needs, they are at most able to inform him in general about their own repertoire for him. So he runs into dead ends, walks for many miles until he discovers that for him a different philosophy would have been a safer companion. But he cannot find what he really needs, i.e., certain, academically checked knowledge, according to the scientific possibilities of the 21st century, concerning the best way *for him*.

Let us consider such a comparative research program in the first sense which tries to prove which explication of transcendence (T1-Tn) corresponds best with empirical data. Let us imagine this would be related to the following syllogism:  
P1: If transcendence construct T1 is correct, it follows from it Y.  
P2: Y is not given.  
C: Thus T1 is disproved.

Nevertheless, this syllogism is logically wrong. This can be well demonstrated in an example:  
P1: If reincarnation exists, we will find people who have been reincarnated.  
P2: No people have been found who were reincarnated.  
C: Reincarnation could still exist; i.e.: We have proved nothing at all.

If, however, we turn upside down the logic of the proposition, we got the same structure as with the syllogism before:  
P1: If people are found who have been reincarnated, then reincarnation exists.  
P2: Some people can be found who have been reincarnated.  
C: Reincarnation exists.

This conclusion brings back the already mentioned problems: First of all the empirical fact “somebody has been reincarnated” is linked tautologically to the conclusion “reincarnation exists” because the statement, somebody has been reincarnated, corresponds to the statement: “In this case there is reincarnation”. This means, that we must know from another source in which cases we want to talk about reincarnation in order to possess an empirical observation verifiable independently of the construct “reincarnation”. However, a definition of the observation datum independent of the construct is simply impossible. We can never determine that something being told by a person means that s/he was reincarnated without basing the observation on a concept of reincarnation. If we assume, according to the second hermeneutic circle, that a concept like reincarnation could possibly be an explication of transcendence, and want to confirm this assumption, we must agree about inducing hypothetical relations between an observation datum and its possible explicatory constructs, having to be tested for their *usefulness*. Usefulness means the whole range of possibilities of a knowledge increase in the sense of lifeworldly and theoretical insights. Only by this comparison of usefulness we can principally, not only in case of religious reality, mutually test such theorems in which the observation data and the constructs are tied together in a circular form (which is the normal case). This means consequently discharging a model of theory of sciences with a clear decidability about the one truth.

The fact that this principal tautology in the proof of empirical constructs really exists, is one reason why the idea of an exact social science remains doomed to failure. As stressed above, for the transcendence construct applies the same as for other social-scientific constructs: The precision of the logical explanation of a research must be translated again and again at certain critical points in the course of the research not into illogical concepts, but into concepts inaccessible to pure logic, to which pragmatic criteria have to be applied – like the comparison of theories according to their usefulness, their effect on the whole as William James formulates, their lifeworldly relevance. However, in this sense the transcendence construct is well positioned in the competition of explanatory attempts, thus directly competing with it like the neurosciences. As the philosopher and psychologist Konstantin Oesterreich (1915) ascertained, the subjective religious experience itself owns just this main characteristic of a higher valency compared with other states of the soul. Transcendence is also bound very closely to finding an ultimate meaning and to the highest faculties of mankind. It cannot be denied that this construct contains more benefits for the life of people than most neuroscientific knowledge. The objection of the materialist, the neuroscience may not be elevating, but true, we do not need to contradict at all, because it should be clear already, that concerning the truth of a scientific explanation compared with another one it is the lifeworldly usefulness that decides, as long as we are dealing with a person, and its knowledge-forming function, while an ultimate external truth criterion is not possible.

So with any social-scientific research project, even to any academic project, the borders consist in the fact that it is only possible to connect a theorem for the *description* of empirical data with these observations (Wittgenstein). Explanation is nothing else but a

descriptive fixation of theoretical premises with a structure being able to illustrate a whole class of incidents. But from this theoretical description laws can be derived which allow predictions and applications (technologies). This concerns also the programme of the investigation of transcendence. So under the transcendence axiom we do not need to content ourselves with a description of prayer practises and their explanation from other subjects than the transcendental. We can ask directly: If person A relies confidently on a fatherly God, how does this prayer affect those parts of her life which are *not* directly controllable by her? If she or another person in comparison confides in a cosmic Self and engages in an internal dialogue with it – what effect has this behaviour on her life? Thus we can combine a question supporting the relevance of our transcendence theorem against other theorems (which cannot really explain how a prayer should affect uncontrollable areas of a person) with a comparative question for the purpose of internal differentiation of the transcendence construct.

Although there are endless possibilities and untrodden paths of the transcendental paradigm, some dark chambers of religion will remain closed to it. To this belong all religious propositions not at all referring to an empirical area (and thus containing pure metaphysics) or not belonging to an area being empirically accessible here and now. Dogmatic statements, like the ascension of Mary, are of purely metaphysical nature and can be put in no manner on empirical legs. Eschatological statements like the condition of the earth after parousia, the return of Christ and the last judgement, count for statements about a future age. Mythological statements or parables like the fall of man in the book of Genesis or Kabbalistic and Gnostic theories on how spirit entered matter can be understood either as images for hardly verifiable cosmogonic models (or even literally) – or become testable empirically as esoteric descriptions of the manhood here and now – and thus become, though subtly however principally, (dis)provable.

On the other hand, it will be hardly possible to falsify a total specification of the transcendence construct – i.e., a single religion – all together, even if this was not protected by numerous empirically inaccessible metaphysical clauses, since the complex construction of multiple theorems, as it can be found in any religion, can never be falsified in total for structural reasons because the theorems do not depend completely on each other and they consequently do not fall like dominoes. However, it will be possible by means of empirical statements to prove or to deny the usefulness of some theorems for the description of transcendence. There the concordance of argument and aimed object has to be watched carefully. In this sense the project of an empirical investigation of what people experience if they experience “transcendence” should be put on safe methodological foundations without running into the totalitarian reductionism of the negation of transcendence or vice versa in a dogmatic fencing of the concept of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Being simply a translation from the German text, some literature is indicated in German, even if it exists in English or is a translation from an English text.